

By SHERYL GAY STOLBERG

WASHINGTON - President Obama, making his final push for a health care overhaul, called Wednesday for Congress to set aside political gamesmanship and allow an "up-or-down-vote" on the measure so that Democrats can pass the legislation and he can sign it into law, after nearly a year of debate.

"This has been a long and wrenching debate," Mr. Obama said, adding that while health care "easily lends itself to demagoguery and political gamesmanship," that is no reason "for those of us who were sent here to lead to just walk away."

Mr. Obama made his remarks to a group of medical professionals, many of them in traditional white lab coats, in the East Room of the White House. In the short 15-minute speech, he avoided using the word "reconciliation," the name for the parliamentary tactic that Democrats must now use to avoid a Republican filibuster of the bill. But senior advisers to the president made clear that is his plan.

"This has been laid out in a way that provides us the maximum flexibility to get it done," White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs told a small group of reporters gathered in his office before Mr. Obama spoke. He said the president would schedule additional events to talk about health care in the coming weeks, and said will make the case for the bill "as vigorously as we can."

Friday will mark one year since Mr. Obama kicked off his plans for a major health care overhaul, with a high-profile forum at the White House that included lawmakers, insurance industry and hospital executives, medical professionals, representatives of the pharmaceutical industry and others with a stake in the debate.

On Wednesday, after 12 months of legislative hearings, town hall meetings, speeches, polls and debates, Mr. Obama made clear he expects Democrats to line up behind him, no matter how skittish they feel about their re-election prospects in the fall.

"The American people want to know if it's still possible for Washington to look out for their

interests and their future," Mr. Obama said. "They are waiting for us to act. They are waiting for us to lead. And as long as I hold this office, I intend to provide that leadership. I don't know how this plays politically, but I know it's right. And so I ask Congress to finish its work, and I look forward to signing this reform into law."

Mr. Obama's remarks usher in what many in Washington are calling the "endgame" of what has been an agonizingly protracted health care debate. The president, who initially hoped to pass a major health overhaul during his first year in office - by Thanksgiving, then by Christmas - is now looking at an Easter deadline.

With the passing of the political seasons, Democrats have been cringing as they worry about what the bill will do to their prospects for re-election.

Since he convened a bipartisan health forum at Blair House last week, Mr. Obama has been laying the groundwork for the course he is now pursuing. He concluded the Blair House meeting by saying he was open to incorporating Republican ideas, but that Democrats would go forward on their own if he did not see any evidence of Republican cooperation.

On Tuesday, in a letter to Congressional leaders, Mr. Obama said he was open to pursuing four specific ideas raised by Republicans during the Blair House forum, including establishing "health courts" to resolve medical malpractice claims and encouraging the use by individuals of tax-advantaged medical savings accounts.

But even as Mr. Obama sent the letter, his chief of staff, Rahm Emanuel, and top health policy adviser, Nancy Ann DeParle, went to Capitol Hill to meet with House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate Democratic leader Harry Reid and prepare a final legislative package that they would be able to pass with simple majorities in each house, using a parliamentary tactic known as reconciliation to avoid a Republican filibuster.

The leaders are still working on the details of that package. "We're getting closer," Jim Manley, Mr. Reid's spokesman, said shortly before the president's remarks. He did not elaborate.

With Republicans accusing Democrats Mr. Obama of trying to ram the bill through Congress, the president and his allies are making the case that, in fact, comprehensive health legislation has already passed both chambers, garnering a majority in the House and a supermajority in the Senate. Technically, they say, reconciliation will be used only to pass a small package of fixes to the original bills.

Under their tentative plan, the House would first approve the bill that was adopted by the Senate on Christmas Eve. Mr. Reid and Ms. Pelosi would also draft a package of changes to be approved by both chambers in a separate reconciliation bill. The reconciliation package would effectively smooth out some of the differences between the House and Senate versions.

The whole bundle would be sent to Mr. Obama to sign into law.

But while that sounds feasible, carrying out the strategy could yet prove tricky. Senate Republicans could try offering countless amendments as a delaying tactic. And Mr. Pelosi could have difficulty rounding up the necessary votes to pass the reconciliation package in the House, because it will strip out anti-abortion language that some Democrats favor.